

# City Rejects San Antonio Police Union Trust Proposal

**Robert Rivard** on 6 May, 2014 at 01:03





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Lawyers for the **City of San Antonio** and the **San Antonio Police Officers Association** met for a fifth round of collective bargaining Monday, but the issues dividing the two sides only grew more pronounced. The city’s chief negotiator firmly rejected the union’s earlier proposal to create a union-managed \$30 million health care trust fund. The police union lawyer, in turn, said there is no chance that the two sides will reach agreement within the 60-day bargaining period set by both sides in March.

Two scheduled bargaining sessions on May 13 and 19 also are in doubt after **union lawyer Ron DeLord** cited scheduling conflicts and said the City had “brought too much hardware to the table” to achieve an agreement so soon. It now seems talks are unlikely to resume before June.

The existing five-year contract expires at the end of September, but an “evergreen” provision in the existing contract calls for it to remain in effect indefinitely. Most public contracts only remain in effect for 30-90 days, thus requiring both sides to bargain in good faith or submit to mediation. The city wants to eliminate the evergreen provision in any new contract, but its existence suggests the union is prepared to walk away from from negotiations rather than make substantial concessions.

The day began with the city’s chief negotiator, **Houston lawyer Jeff Londa**, telling his counterpart, Georgetown lawyer Ron DeLord, the police union’s chief negotiator, that the City was rejecting a union proposal to create a union-controlled \$30 million health care trust fund as a way of addressing rising health-care costs that city leaders say are unsustainable.

Londa recited a laundry list of failed public trusts in other states where government entities were forced to intervene and bail out multi-million dollar shortfalls. He also cited two instances of public corruption by San Antonio police union officials as reason not to entrust union officials to manage a trust.

“There are many bad examples of bad trusts, but putting those bad examples aside we think the fundamental problem is the benefits and premium structure, not who is running it,” Londa said, adding that it would reduce the city’s pool of employees and leverage negotiating with insurers.

“For all of the above reasons we don’t think the trust is a good idea and we reject it,” Londa said. “We want the city to continue to provide health care benefits to police and firefighters. We have proposed that ... all of the police and firefighters come under the current city civilian plan.”

Londa invited DeLord to come back to the table with a new counter-proposal that “establishes certain benefit levels, establishes certain premiums within the context of the current city (civilian) plan.”

After a brief union caucus, DeLord responded.

“I guess I’m a little surprised that all of your efforts went into finding dysfunctional trusts and I guess the burden is on us to find functioning trusts and I guess we will do that,” DeLord said. “You have the right to say whatever you want, but if the reason for not doing it, is because there is a potential for corruption than I’ll spend my interim Googling mayors, city council members, priests, PTA, police, fire, Little League, charity, businesses and lawyers and I’ll find you a list that will fill this room of people that violated their oaths.”

DeLord then cited multiple recent news stories about South Texas elected officials who have pleaded guilty to various criminal charges to illustrate his point that union leaders have no corner on corruption.



*Houston labor lawyer Jeff Londa, representing the City of San Antonio.*



*Ron Delord. Courtesy photo.*

“Put aside the issue of corruption, and the basic problem we have is benefits and premium structure, not who runs the plan,” Londa said after the session. “We will not agree to a trust. That is not going to happen. Our goal is to reduce the city’s cost down to the level of the civilian plan.”

DeLord said the he would return to the bargaining table with proposals to alter the current civilian plan that would make it more acceptable to the police union. But he told Londa it wouldn’t happen on the agreed-upon timeline.

“We’re not going to bargain a new contract in 60 days, no one ever has in Texas,” DeLord said, later adding, “There’s no reason to fix the drapes when the house is burning down.”

Londa cited the signed Framework agreed upon in March, which DeLord dismissed since he was only hired by the union weeks ago. For a moment, the two sides seemed to be headed toward impasse.

“I guess we’re done,” he said, before the rhetoric cooled and the two sides began to discuss secondary issues.

Londa and fellow negotiator Bettye Lynn reiterated their desire to reduce the current level of tuition reimbursements, which exceeded \$350,000 last year for police union members, some pursuing degrees unrelated to law enforcement. The city wants to cap the maximum annual reimbursement for each member, and limit coursework to law enforcement and management-related professional development.

The city again raised the issue of the union legal fund that requires the city to pay \$31 a month for every police officer. Union members now charge private legal expenses to the fund. If an officer gets arrested for driving while intoxicated, for example, his legal expenses are paid for by the fund. There is currently more than \$3 million in the union-controlled fund, which costs the city more than \$1 million a year for both police and firefighters.

The session ended with DeLord promising to propose new negotiating dates for the city to consider, even as he noted he is prepared to work through the summer on a new contract.